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Claudio M. Grossman

American University Washington College of Law

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Tribute for Professor Burton Wechsler

TRIBUTE FOR PROFESSOR BURTON WECHSLER

CLAUDIO M. GROSSMAN*

When I came to American University in 1982, the first faculty member to knock on my door was Professor Burton Wechsler. He wanted to know anything and everything about the Netherlands, where I had lived for the last nine years, and about Chile, my country of origin. He was not shy about sharing his views with me about life, including his strong conviction that the most important organizing principle for life was the struggle for human dignity. At first, this experience was overwhelming and to paraphrase the tests for the permissibility of self-defense in classic international law, left me “without a moment of choice or an instant for deliberation.” Many more conversations with Burt would follow, as I discovered what everyone in our community already knew, that for Burt affection had no limits, generosity no boundaries, and candy, chocolates, nuts, dried fruits (that he kept in his office in inexhaustible amounts) had to be eaten while solving the problems of the world.

As time goes by and I acquire institutional roles in the law school that provide me with additional perspectives on our community, Burt’s image in my mind continues to grow. His commitment and passion for teaching and the students inspired us all. For Burt, the classroom was only one of the important avenues to teach, as it was also the corridor, the cafeteria, the elevators, and his home (that he and Fredi, his love for life, generously kept open for all). For Burt, there were no anonymous students, as even in the largest classes he learned the names of everyone. He presented material with passion and his views with conviction, while respecting different opinions and

* Dean and Professor of Law, *American University, Washington College of Law*. Licenciado en Ciencias Jurídicas y Sociales, *University of Chile*, SJD, *University of Amsterdam*, The Netherlands.

encouraging the students to develop their own. In recognition of his commitment he repeatedly won the Outstanding Teaching Award given by the students every year, and at the students' initiative, the law school named the First Amendment Moot Court Competition in his honor in 1993. Hundreds of alumni of WCL that I meet talk about Burt's lasting influence in shaping their views on the Constitution, and above everything else, about freedom of speech, the principles of which Burt passionately defended. A powerful advocate for clinical education and experiential learning, WCL's renowned clinics and externship program are indebted to him for his relentless support. Burt strongly supported (as anyone in the Dean's office would know) the allocation of resources for PILRAP (Public Interest Law Repayment Program), a program designed to provide financial support to graduates of the law school working in low-paying public interest jobs, and the Equal Justice Foundations Fellowships, which allow students to work in public interest positions during the summer.

Burt came to WCL in 1978 after teaching law at Antioch Law School and Valparaiso Law School. After joining our faculty he remained with us for 20 years until 1998. At that time he told me that he did not want to continue to teach because he was not strong enough; for Burt teaching was a total commitment, and he had too much integrity to continue in the classroom if he felt he could not give everything to his students.

On May 2, 1998, our community celebrated Professor Wechsler's role at the Washington College of Law and in our lives. Hundreds of us gave Burt a testimony of our gratitude and affection during a dinner celebrated in his honor. Burt greatly liked the event, whose proceeds went, at his request—where else—but to PILRAP. More than anything he enjoyed participating in a tribute to something that he saw as much more important than himself: the responsibility that lawyers have to contribute to a better world. He would equally enjoy this initiative by the Law Review. With his piercing eyes and unlimited generosity, Burt Wechsler would be knocking on our doors and our consciences asking all the right questions and commenting on every article, reminding us—even against our strenuous protests—that this is not about him, but about our duty to imagine a better world and our responsibility for achieving it.